

DO YOU HAVE TO GO TO CHURCH
TO BE A CHRISTIAN?
Matthew 16:13-18
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If you had been observing the traffic in and out of Broad Street Presbyterian Church on Wednesday, May 15 and the next several days you would have seen something peculiar. On that Wednesday, as on every Wednesday, the building began to come to life between six and seven with the arrival of custodians and cooks, followed by the church staff and the CMACAO Head Start staff, and then the children of Head Start, and between 8:30 and 9:00 the beginning of a long parade of people coming to the church for one reason or another; to meet in one of the rooms, to talk to a minister about getting married, to sell the business office a new brand of floor wax, to tune the organ. On this day, however, some of the people leaving the church have orchids in their hands - small boxed orchids. You can tell that the ones with the orchids don't ordinarily have orchids. They are clients of COMPASS; they have come to the church to see the Caseworker Margaret Watson.

How they got the orchids is another story - and I'd like you to know it because it's a good example of what the church is. In fact, I wish you could remember the story whenever you get to the part in the Apostles' Creed that goes, "I believe in the holy catholic Church." Mostly we think about the Roman Catholic Church when we get to that part of the creed, and sometimes we have changed the language to "Christian Church," and sometimes some of us have simply clammed up at that phrase rather than affirm anything close to loyalty to the Catholic Church; but I'd like you not to do that - if you can't resist dealing with it, to remember that catholic means universal and the Roman Church is surely a significant part of the holy catholic Church, as are the churches of the Reformed, Presbyterian tradition, and the Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal traditions. But that's a lot even to think as you're reciting "I believe in the holy catholic Church"...so remember the COMPASS clients coming through the door with the orchids.

How they came to have those orchids happened like this. Broad Street's caseworker, among other helpful skills, has an uncanny way of bringing together community resources and human need. That's the language you use on resumes and grant applications. Translated into practical terms it means that Margaret stops at Krogers on her way to work every morning and by prior arrangement with the store manager loads her car up with day-old bread and sometimes doughnuts and other interesting items. Indeed, I have been driving down Broad Street and have been passed on the inside by a Chevrolet Caprice, seemingly driverless, filled to the roof with bread. The bread ends up in the food pantry mostly. Although if breakfast has been on the light side, Margaret's arrival in the morning always brings with it interesting possibilities. On May 15 the store offered the orchids and with the sound instincts with which God has blessed her, Margaret said "yes" and so for several days people who came to Broad Street Presbyterian Church because they were evicted from their apartment, or their utilities were shut off, or there was no food for their children, or their spouse had abandoned them and there was no place to go - got a warm welcome, some concrete assistance, some good advice, and an orchid. If the orchid was the only thing they got the church would be guilty of gross insensitivity to human need and societal injustice. If the assistance and advice was all they got, the church would be simply another welfare agency. If they got nothing but a promise that a task force

is studying systematic injustice and working for positive social change, the church would be guilty of depersonalizing poverty in the same way the culture is expert at depersonalizing all its injustices. Here, in this instance, all three happened. Help was delivered, societal change is discussed and pressed here, and the individual was affirmed, human dignity reappeared in an unlikely symbol of grace - an orchid. That's what church is - at its best.

The text this morning is critical. I chose it for my senior thesis in divinity school. I labored with the Greek and learned that the word "church" - "ekklesia" - those "called out" - in the gospels, all three in Matthew, once in Chapter 16 and twice in Chapter 18. I learned that Biblical scholars have always pondered the possibility that Jesus didn't say it at all: that Matthew, clearly Peter's friend and advocate, wrote it in after the fact, after the church was a going concern, to enhance his friend Peter's role in the church. I waded through all the arguments and have been mulling them over and over in my mind ever since. Mostly because when you know the church as intimately as a minister does, you do on occasion wonder if this is what Jesus meant.

My conclusions about the text are these:

...Jesus said it. Even if he didn't use an Aramaic word which is accurately translated "ekklesia" in Greek, which is translated "church" in English, he meant the reference to a company, a group, an organic human fellowship which would become an institution.

...Jesus renamed Simon - Peter - the Greek for which is indeed Petros - "rock." And on that rock - he did build the "ekklesia." The rock, I love to remember, was no polished diamond, no sharp flint, no granite slab - rather a rough boulder, with very crumbly edges.

I conclude that Jesus, in fact, formed a company of followers - who became believers. They were, in Elton Trueblood's memorial image, "The company of the committed." They followed him as he walked through Galilee. The life they lived together was shaped and formed by the experience of the being with him. They learned from him; they listened as he talked; they watched as he related to, healed, and helped other people. Their own relationships with each other began to reflect the power of his influence. I conclude that Jesus was intentional about it; that he purposefully molded those people into a cadre of disciples with a task to do. The twelve and the larger company of followers were to reflect the Good News he announced - the news of God's reign. They were, in and of themselves, an outpost of the kingdom of God. In their relationships, their corporate life, God was King; not Caesar, not Herod, not Caiaphas, not the law of Moses, not status - society. God alone. And, I conclude, he intended for them to be the agents of the kingdom; to persuade others to join it, to participate in God's reign. They were a missionary society.

Do you have to go to church to be a Christian? Church is what a Christian is. The question makes no sense. Followers of Jesus were part of the company. That's what a follower did - joined up with the followers. Jesus did not use the word "Christian." Jesus did not ask people to believe things about himself. What he did was say "follow me." Join the company. Of course you have to go to church to be a Christian...that's what a Christian is.

Now let's defuse the issue. People who elect not to go to church are not bad people. God doesn't love those who have no church less. And surely, electing to play golf instead of attending worship is not to choose eternal hell over the bliss of heaven. When the church has said that, and it often has, and often does, and is always tempted to, it is terribly unfaithful to its task and its Lord. We believe in a God whose love is eternal. To announce to the world that the only way to be saved by that love is to join a church - is presumptuous and self serving and akin to the institutional hypocrisy which hounded Jesus to his death. The question is not, "Do you have to go to church in order to get to heaven?" Mark Twain, by the way, remarked that if that were the case, and the only people in heaven were the local Methodists, he was glad he didn't have to spend eternity there. The question is - does being a Christian mean Church - and I am saying it does in the same way that being a Republican or Democrat means moving from intellectual abstractions to pulling an appropriate lever every four years, writing a check to the party treasurer, and perhaps attending a meeting on occasion. Your Republicanism is an irrelevant abstraction until it causes you to do something.

The American tradition about church and church going is fascinating. In a new book, What Do You Need From Your Church? Alban Institute scholar Celia Allison Hahn observes that most Americans seem to have a stereotyped image of the Colonial Era as one of great piety and church going. Actually, there were far more taverns and wayside inns in Colonial America than churches. "Fewer than one in ten Americans were affiliated with any religious institutions." (see Christian Century, 2/27/85, p. 211, Russell Hale, "The Unchurched: Who They Are and Why They Stay Away") Many people came here to get away from State supported churches and coerced religion. The freedom to live in a secular state: the freedom not to be religious is one of the fundamental American traditions. Historians say it is also the reason why the American churches are so vigorous and healthy. In any event, it is not surprising that when Americans are asked, as they were in a 1978 Gallup Poll, "Do you have to go to church to be religious?" 88% of the population says no. At the same time 70% of the population claim affiliation with a church or synagogue and 40% attend weekly. Ms. Hahn comments: "It seems to be part of (American) tradition: (1) to believe in God, (2) to say that one doesn't need to go to church, (3) to go anyway." (Ibid., p. 211)

A common pattern in this country is the following life-sequence: baptism and Sunday School attendance through junior high school or confirmation, gradual withdrawal from church through high school and into college and young adult years, concurrently with a general alienation and separation from adult institutions, tastes, style, and customs. The result is the loss of a decade of spiritual growth during which time the person has grown dramatically intellectually, politically, socially, and relationally. Ms. Hahn characterized it like this: "...there personal faith, like cut flowers, stops growing. Their religion is like a dried flower pressed in a Bible and often seems like nothing more than a desire for peaceful feelings, a vague longing to be connected with something that transcends the self and a sense of obligation to be decent to their fellows - all positive stirrings, but hardly the vigorous plant that could flourish in a nurturing religious community... The memories of childish religious sentiments are not strong enough stuff to equip adult saints for their work of ministry." (p. 214)

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The incredible success and popularity of television religion I think is partially attributable to the fact that you can have it without coming to terms with the church, the company of the committed. You can enjoy it, feel good about it - and not bump into the eccentricities, hypocrisies, and human particularities of Old St. John's by the gas station.

Theologically, however, the church is an item of faith for us. We acknowledge in the Apostles' Creed that, historically, to be a follower of Jesus was to be part of his people. That is what he was about: bringing people into the new fellowship and in the complexity of their corporate life, showing something of God's reign on earth.

We believe in the church, not because it's perfect. God knows, it isn't! In fact, we're the only institution in society that requires its constituents to acknowledge their imperfection as they become members. I believe in the church because I believe Jesus Christ called it into being and because I believe he is present in the church in real and tangible ways. I believe it was and is built on the rock of human faith, Peter's and yours and mine. And I believe that the gates of hell, the power of death, all earthly authority - will not prevail ultimately over it.

I affirm that after an arduous week as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, because along with a vision of the church's humanness and complicity in human frailty, sin, and plain foolishness, the national gathering of Presbyterians is a reminder that we are very durable: that in one form or another God's people have had a way of prevailing over the power of the world from Pharaoh to the Babylonian emperors; from Persian tyrants to the Caesars; the church has endured dark ages, barbarism, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung.

I affirm my belief in the church after witnessing our part of it grapple once again with what it means to be Christians together, to follow Jesus in this complex world of ours. The Assembly looked at and spoke to some difficult issues. It declared that abortion is not an acceptable method of birth control, but reaffirmed its position that the rights of women to elect an abortion during the first part of pregnancy should be protected. It instructed itself to divest its holdings in four corporations whom are involved in South Africa, as an expression of its moral revulsion at the sin of apartheid. It heard a quietly eloquent attorney from Tucson, the son of an FBI agent and State Prosecuting Attorney, testify that the government is breaking its own laws with respect to the deportation of refugees from Central America, and that for the church not to oppose, to simply watch it happen is to risk the kind of moral neutrality which has been disastrous for the human race in the past. And so the Assembly allocated \$100,000 for legal costs to clarify the issue of sanctuary for those refugees in court. Those are not comfortable issues. They are very important issues. Our corner of the church is willing to try to follow Jesus faithfully with respect to these issues, even when we disagree with one another about their resolution. That has been our tradition since the days of the Reformation and the American Revolution when Presbyterians were strongly supportive of the radical ideas of freedom and justice for all. I believe in the church - not that it is always right; but because Jesus Christ calls it to be faithful, and because it tries, always, to allow God to reign over the critical issues on the agenda in our nation and our world today.

Do you have to go to church to be a Christian? If the question were, "Do

you have to go to church to be saved by God's grace and love?" the answer would be "no." Or "Do you have to go to church to live a good life?" the answer would be "of course not." But I don't know how else to be a Christian. I don't know how to follow Jesus apart from the others. I don't know how to think theologically apart from the 1985 years of thinking and struggling that precede me. I don't know how to worship the creator God without the others to help me sing and pray and give and obey. I wouldn't know where to begin without a sense of the company, the family of faith, the body of believers.

I don't know where else the story of Jesus will be told to the next generation. I don't know where else human life will be so honored that issues of human rights and human justice are never neglected nor forgotten. I don't know where else the life of forgiveness, grace, and love is taken seriously. And I truly don't know where else you can go when your life is falling apart and receive, among other things, an orchid. Amen.